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January 7, 1963

Dr. Bowen C. Dees  
Division of Scientific Personnel and Education  
National Science Foundation  
2101 Constitution Avenue  
Washington 25, D. C.

Dear Dr. Dees:

A number of authors have commented on seasonal fluctuations of birthdates in relation to intellectual performance. I would not at first give much credence to assertions with such astrological connotations. However, some tentative studies do bring out some suggestive deviations; and on reflection one can think of a number of potential sources, in part through the factors which also influence the distribution of total births. A deeper analysis would require detailed information for intro-family comparison not easy or cheap to acquire on a large scale. However, my colleague, Dr. L. L. Cavalli-Sforza may be able to do some of this.

Meanwhile it occurred to me that you must have a large file of birth data already punched for a select population: the science Ph.D.'s of the United States, in connection with the Register of Scientific and Technical Personnel. Clearly this is not as well defined a population as one would like, and there are serious problems of setting up suitable controls. Still, if it is true that the figures are already machinable, it would be foolish not to take advantage of this for a crude summary.

If this has not already been done, might I ask whether I could have your cooperation in running out a summary of your Ph.D. file, perhaps even better just the physicists plus chemists, by year and month of birth (i). If it could be done without significant added trouble I would also ask for another summary, by day of month (regardless of year (ii) or of month and year (iii)) as a check against certain kinds of biases and systematic errors. The small samples I have run by hand from American Men of Science suggest that the trends have not been the same from decade to decade, so that a file large enough to give a useful density for (i) is essential.

Dr. Walter Bodmer here is also interested in the problem and will assist in the statistical analyses. We are reasonably well set up for computation here, with convenient access to an IBM 7090, but such questions as the desirability of transferring more detailed vital statistics might best be left for consideration, if at all, till after this fairly simple summary has been looked at. If any comparable study on this material has already been made, or is currently contemplated I trust you will inform me.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg  
Professor of Genetics

Dees - NSF